The Highway

The cooling afternoon rain had come over the valley, touching the corn in the tilled mountain fields, tapping on the dry grass roof of the hut. In the rainy darkness the woman ground corn between cakes of lava rock, working steadily. In the wet lightlessness, somewhere, a baby cried.

Hernando stood waiting for the rain to cease so he might take the wooden plow into the field again. Below, the river boiled brown and thickened in its course. The concrete highway, another river, did not flow at all; it lay shining, empty. A car had not come along it in an hour. This was, in itself, of unusual interest. Over the years there had not been an hour when a car had not pulled up, someone shouting, "Hey there, can we take your picture?" Someone with a box that clicked, and a coin in his hand. If he walked slowly across the field without his hat, sometimes they called, "Oh, we want you with your hat on!" And they waved their hands, rich with gold things that told time, or identified them, or did nothing at all but winked like spider's eyes in the sun. So he would turn and go back to get his hat.

His wife spoke. "Something is wrong, Hernando?"

"*Sí.* The road. Something big has happened. Something big to make the road so empty this way."

He walked from the hut slowly and easily, the rain washing over the twined shoes of grass and thick tire rubber he wore. He remembered very well the incident of this pair of shoes. The tire had come into the hut with violence one night, exploding the chickens and the pots apart! It had come alone, rolling swiftly. The car, off which it had come, had rushed on, as far as the curve, and hung a moment, headlights reflected, before plunging into the river. The car was still there. One might see it on a good day, when the river ran slow and the mud cleared. Deep under, its metal shining, long and low and very rich, lay the car. But then the mud came in again and you saw nothing.

The following day he had carved the shoe soles from the tire rubber.

He reached the highway now, and stood upon it, listening to the small sounds it made in the rain.

Then, suddenly, as if at a signal, the cars came. Hundreds of them, miles of them, rushing and rushing as he stood, by and by him. The big long black cars heading north toward the United States, roaring, taking the curves at too great a speed. With a ceaseless blowing and honking. And there was something about the faces of the people packed into the cars, something which dropped him into a deep silence. He stood back to let the cars roar on. He counted them until he tired. Five hundred, a thousand cars passed, and there was something in the faces of all of them. But they moved too swiftly for him to tell what this thing was.

Finally the silence and emptiness returned. The swift

long low convertible cars were gone. He heard the last horn fade.

The road was empty again.

It had been like a funeral cortege. But a wild one, racing, hair out, screaming to some ceremony ever northward. Why? He could only shake his head and rub his fingers softly, at his sides.

Now, all alone, a final car. There was something very, very final about it. Down the mountain road in the thin cool rain, fuming up great clouds of steam, came an old Ford. It was traveling as swiftly as it might. He expected it to break apart any instant. When this ancient Ford saw Hernando it pulled up, caked with mud and rusted, the radiator bubbling angrily.

"May we have some water, please, señor!"

A young man, perhaps twenty-one, was driving. He wore a yellow sweater, an open-collared white shirt and gray pants. In the topless car the rain fell upon him and five young women packed so they could not move in the interior. They were all very pretty and they were keeping the rain from themselves and the driver with old newspapers. But the rain got through to them, soaking their bright dresses, soaking the young man. His hair was plastered with rain. But they did not seem to care. None complained, and this was unusual. Always before they complained, of rain, of heat, of time, of cold, of distance.

Hernando nodded. "I'll bring you water."

"Oh, please hurry!" one of the girls cried. She sounded very high and afraid. There was no impatience in her, only an asking out of fear. For the first time Hernando ran when a tourist asked, always before he had walked slower at such requests.

He returned with a hub lid full of water. This, too, had been a gift from the highway. One afternoon it had sailed like a flung coin into his field, round and glittering. The car to which it belonged had slid on, oblivious to the fact that it had lost a silver eye. Until now, he and his wife had used it for washing and cooking; it made a fine bowl.

As he poured the water into the boiling radiator, Hernando looked up at their stricken faces. "Oh, thank you, thank you," said one of the girls. "You don't know what this means."

Hernando smiled. "So much traffic in this hour. It all goes one way. North."

He did not mean to say anything to hurt them. But when he looked up again there all of them sat, in the rain, and they were crying. They were crying very hard. And the young man was trying to stop them by laying his hands on their shoulders and shaking them gently, one at a time, but they held their papers over their heads and their mouths moved and their eyes were shut and their faces changed color and they cried, some loud, some soft.

Hernando stood with the half-empty lid in his fingers. "I did not mean to say anything, señor," he apologized.

"That's all right," said the driver.

"What is wrong, señor?"

"Haven't you heard?" replied the young man, turning, holding tightly to the wheel with one hand, leaning forward. "It's happened."

This was bad. The others, at this, cried still harder, holding onto each other, forgetting the newspapers, letting the rain fall and mingle with their tears.

Hernando stiffened. He put the rest of the water into the radiator. He looked at the sky, which was black with

storm. He looked at the river rushing. He felt the asphalt under his shoes.

He came to the side of the car. The young man took his hand and gave him a peso. "No." Hernando gave it back. "It is my pleasure."

"Thank you, you're so kind," said one of the girls, still sobbing. "Oh, Mama, Papa. Oh, I want to be home, I want to be home. Oh, Mama, Dad." And others held her.

"I did not hear, señor," said Hernando quietly.

"The war!" shouted the young man as if no one could hear. "It's come, the atom war, the end of the world!"

"Señor, señor," said Hernando.

"Thank you, thank you for your help. Good-by," said the young man.

"Good-by," they all said in the rain, not seeing him.

He stood while the car engaged its gears and rattled off down, fading away, through the valley. Finally it was gone, with the young women in it, the last car, the newspapers held and fluttered over their heads.

Hernando did not move for a long time. The rain ran very cold down his cheeks and along his fingers and into the woven garment on his legs. He held his breath, waiting, tight and tensed.

He watched the highway, but it did not move again. He doubted that it would move much for a very long time.

The rain stopped. The sky broke through the clouds. In ten minutes the storm was gone, like a bad breath. A sweet wind blew the smell of the jungle up to him. He could hear the river moving gently and easily on its way. The jungle was very green, everything was fresh. He walked down through the field to his house and picked up his plow. With

his hands on it he looked at the sky beginning to burn hot with the sun.

His wife called out from her work. "What happened, Hernando?"

"It is nothing," he replied.

He set the plow in the furrow, he called sharply to his burro, "Burrrrrrr-o!" And they walked together through the rich field, under the clearing sky, on their tilled land by the deep river.

"What do they mean, 'the world'?" he said.